Sen. Arlen Specter insists banning guns does nothing to keep them from criminals.

Critics say the senator is unresponsive to the public's concern with street violence.

Gun control? Specter is sticking to his guns

By Michael Blood
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Supporters of tougher gun control are not finding a friend in Sen. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, a former Philadelphia prosecutor who long ago decided that more regulation "doesn't keep them out of the hands of the criminals."

A ban on military-style assault weapons? The three-term Republican has voted against it consistently.

The Brady bill, which set up a five-day waiting period for handgun purchases? Specter voted against it.

At a time when the Clinton administration wants to increase federal licensing fees for gun dealers and when big-city mayors in Pennsylvania and elsewhere are pushing stricter gun control, Specter is not convinced that such measures do much good.

"If I thought that the Brady bill would have a real impact on violent crime, I would have supported it," said Specter, Philadelphia's district attorney from 1966 to 1974.

"The criminals don't have any problems getting a hold of [assault] weapons, no matter what you do. They get them illegally. It's just a limitation on hunters and sportsmen."

Specter's position has earned him the loyalty and financial support of the National Rifle Association (NRA), which has nearly 250,000 members in Pennsylvania, a membership second in size only to California. In direct donations or in money spent on his behalf, the NRA has pumped at least $170,000 into Specter's Senate campaigns.

"He's always voted with us," said NRA spokesman Joseph M. Phillips.

But others argue that Specter's reluctance to support the Brady bill and similar measures makes him appear unresponsive to a public grown fearful of street violence.

"Any senator who voted against the Brady bill is out of step with what the public wants," said Jeff Muchnick, spokesman for the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence in Washington.

"We're hopeful Senator Specter will sometime change his position, because there's a growing concern on this issue," said Pittsburgh Council President Jack Wagner, who sponsored the assault-weapons ban there.

With 1.1 million hunters in the state, firearms have long been part of the recreational life of many Pennsylvanians. The state has more than 12,000 gun dealers and collectors, one of the highest concentrations in the country. Accordingly, gun con-

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PHILA INQUIRER
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Specter: Gun control ineffective

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trol has long been viewed as a sort of third rail in Pennsylvania politics, an issue best left alone.

But recent events, such as the slaying of six commuters on a rush-hour train in New York, have prompted calls for greater regulation. President Clinton, who signed the Brady bill, is considering proposals to license handguns and ban devices that would feed more than 10 rounds of ammunition into a weapon, a provision contained in Senate-passed anti-crime legislation.

Pittsburgh and Philadelphia have banned assault weapons. This month, the state House endorsed legislation to ban 15 types of military-style guns, superseding local laws.

State Attorney General Ernie Preate Jr. has said the legislature is "moving in the right direction" and that assault weapons "are not for hunting game; they're for killing people."

Specter, however, says the solution must focus on fixing the nation's failed criminal justice system by improving rehabilitation for juveniles, ensuring adequate prison cells for career criminals and clearing the way for use of the death penalty.

"What you have is a failed criminal justice system and all these feel-good measures," said Specter, who met with NRA officials and sportsmen's groups in Wilkes-Barre and Harrisburg yesterday.

"We had a gun-control measure in Philadelphia when I was district attorney," he added. "And the experience was overwhelming that gun control doesn't keep them out of the hands of the criminals."

In 1991, Specter supported an NRA-backed amendment that would have given states two years to set up a system that would let gun dealers check computerized criminal records to determine whether a buyer was a convicted felon. The amendment was offered as an alternative to the Brady bill's waiting period.